

# BACK FENCE

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## SIXTIES DEJA VU

# Don't Consider America's Armed Forces 'Victims'

Since I was otherwise occupied as a POW in Hanoi and wasn't able to observe firsthand, I suppose it was a '60s thing — when everybody who was anybody was or deeply aspired to be a *victim*. And, later, when the soldiers who'd fought valiantly in a war they actually won handily en route to defeating an entire evil empire demanded the same respect given every other



PAUL GALANTI

element in society — deserving or not — they were accorded their own category of victimhood and enshrined in the most out-of-sight, obscure memorial in Washington, D.C. The re-writing of history to correct the many historical perversions has been very slow in coming.

I remember writing one of my first Op/Eds about the Vietnam "Wall," which reminded me then of a big hole in the ground or a large open mouth à la a contemporary actress/ally of our enemy. But it was a *nice* gesture. Although it tended to patronize the suddenly glamorous former "baby killers," most of our contemporaries in military service shrugged it off as a belated, sort-of thanks from a grateful nation.

From my first days in the military, I was taught that our job was to serve; there would be tough times but keep a stiff upper lip and press on. And enjoy the good times and camaraderie that military life — almost exclusively — engenders. Most movies back then had male heroes who sucked up adversity and pressed on. Mothers encouraged their daughters to marry the strong, silent types — like John Wayne.

On my return in 1973, being greeted by crowds and overuse of the sobriquet "hero" was embarrassing and confusing. The words and articles written about our in-

carceration in the filthy, miserable dungeons of communist Vietnam were laced with the term "heroes" — and there were, in fact, a few of those. But it became apparent, early on, that by *hero* the writers and speakers and extollers usually meant *victim* — as in *you poor guys*. There was obviously a confusion of terminology! In fact, the roles had been reversed.

## At Home, the Same Spin

During my entire time in the infamous Hanoi Hilton POW compound, I felt like Winston Smith in Orwell's *1984* as the North Vietnamese propagandists talked about their glowing victories and mocked American efforts as the ignominious defeats of the U.S. aggressors and their lackeys. Now that I was home, I began to feel that propagandists in our country had developed their own strain of Newspeak to justify their weak arguments. When we POWs were released in February 1973 after the crushing B-52 raids and crippling of North Vietnamese commerce, I thought we'd won. Imagine my surprise when many Americans apparently indoctrinated by academia and a powerful media seemed to think we'd been routed.

Fast forward to 2007. Reading the generally unbelievable mainstream media, one would suspect that unemployed communist propagandists had found a new home — as journalists. Their endless agonizing over American losses omits any mention of the good things that are happening throughout the Middle East or even the crippling losses of the other side! Embedded in the safe Green Zone, reporters write damning articles that cannot be corroborated. I'm almost glad this is happening because I can now see with my own eyes what transpired here in the 1960s while I read between the lines in Vietnam. From the condescending words used to describe the fighting forces, to outright exaggerations and

lies, efforts are made to transform our servicemen into "victims."

Regardless of how it started, the assault on America by our own tenured, unassailable academy, by our own "free" press and politicians for personal gain is undone by e-mails from actual soldiers and Marines in harm's way. But the true story usually fails to gain traction.

It's much easier to manufacture hand-wringing bad news to weep and wail and whine about our valiant troops/victims than it is to find something interesting to report about our successes. Call it the Dan Rather/Jayson Blair School of Journalistic Integrity — it has a deleterious effect on those who never cross-check the stories. It's a good reason that polls can swing up and down by 10 percentage points on the basis of an unreliable but sensational story.

## Military Doesn't Need Sympathy

Our armed forces are not victims. They are not in Iraq because they're dumb. They are performing selfless acts on behalf of all Americans, and they don't need sympathy. That, simply, is what they do. Proudly. And justifiably so.

Always have, always will.

It's something the Hate America crowd will never understand. Frankly, most of those serving don't care what their de facto domestic enemies think of them. But, if those ungrateful Americans ever need help, their armed forces will be there serving proudly.

■ *A Richmond resident, retired Navy commander and attack pilot Paul Galanti was a prisoner of war in Vietnam from 1966 until 1973. He is currently the chairman of the Board of Veterans Services for the commonwealth. His Commentary Columns regarding veterans appear regularly on the Back Fence.*



## Your 2 Cents

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Regarding the winning-team myth from a recent TIMES-DISPATCH: Who can be surprised by this when college football coaches make more than academic professors? The priorities resulting from big-time athletics on the college level are disgusting. For example, athletic teams and coaches are treated lavishly on road trips, whereas graduate students and their professors have to bow and scrape just to go to conferences.

— Tom Earles, Culpeper



If anyone who does conservation work had to go through the bureaucratic nightmare that is mandated to get any of this conservation money to repair waterways or whatever, they would understand why the work is not being done. The bureaucracies are so rigged that they are almost unable to be dealt with. It is not worth the trouble. The only other way to fix these problems is to mandate something, and I'm sure that the people won't go for that.

— Claude Reeson, Spring Grove



After the accident occurred that took the lives of five people, the mother stated that she was driving and her son unbuckled himself. She then states, "I tried to buckle him back, but it was too late." Once again we as drivers are trying to do too much. How do you drive and rebuckle your child using one hand and keep your eyes on the road? This accident, caused by another vehicle, was totally preventable. All they had to do was pull over.

— Ron J. Melancon, Glen Allen



Don't be fooled into believing that an increase in the Virginia diesel-fuels tax is not a transparent tax increase on everyone. Since the delivery of almost all consumer goods is fueled by diesel fuel, any tax increase will be passed on to the final retail-user price.

— Max Maizels, Richmond



I have no doubt that if Michael Paul Williams were writing the weather forecast, he would put a racial spin on it.

— R. Adrian Davies, Richmond



The Rev. Rodney Rodis was recently charged with one count of embezzlement. From my reading of THE TIMES-DISPATCH, he may have embezzled from more than one parishioner. Consequently, he should be charged with multiple counts of embezzlement. If he committed more than one embezzlement, he should be charged under the three-strikes-and-you're-out laws.

— James R. Flinn, Richmond



I believe that politicians are not influenced by campaign contributions. I also believe that the Rolex I bought on a street corner in New York City is real.

— Henry Manger, Midlothian



Pray for the poor pope. If his lieutenants aren't chasing altar boys, they're stealing from the collection plate, and/or living double lives as married family men. Benedict XVI has got to be wondering WWJD?

— Ernest Irby, Henrico



With regard to the proposed apology for slavery: I'm pretty sure such a proposal will be forthcoming in the near future. I would like to request, though, that I not be included in any such action, because I, like Frank Hargrove, have nothing to apologize for, especially regarding slavery. I think that such an action is about as foolish as what occurred with the Japanese internment camp fiasco of several years ago.

— Robert Grosz Sr., Henrico



I find it ironic that we see these multiple bins to segregate paper, trash, and aluminum cans. That's great. But you go to a construction site and you see a huge trash bin into which everything is going: trash, lumber, wallboard, you name it. I read about the outfit named Intrinergy, which is trying to profitably reuse waste, and I asked if there was any effort to have segregated Dumpsters at construction sites. Obviously, if materials are valued at the construction site, it will rush them back into the process to be recycled for the benefit of all.

— Phil Wallace, Chester

## MORE ASSISTANCE

# Virginia Agencies, Assembly Aid State's Veterans

In the current General Assembly session, similar to last year's, the commonwealth's transportation infrastructure remains the primary focus. Regardless of what the final transportation package provides, it will require substantial funding. It is imperative that this funding not come at the expense of our veterans. In this environment, the commonwealth's commitment to its veterans requires vigilance, innovation, and, as has been the norm for the past five years, continued bipartisan support.



JOHN MONTGOMERY

Last June, Gov. Tim Kaine, recognizing the need to do more for veterans with the available funding, issued Executive Order 19, which (1) directed the Virginia Department of Veterans Services (DVS) to conduct an across-the-board review of commonwealth agencies to (a) determine the level of services to veterans and

(b) find ways to expand those services through better coordination, innovation, and implementation of a series of best practices. The order also (2) called for special attention to be provided to services for the growing number of disabled veterans and to the preference in state hiring of veterans.

Last fall, the DVS completed and published an interim report that outlined the current state of agency services and identified opportunities for improving services by agencies partnering with the DVS. The state of current services is broad and significant. There are 13 agencies providing some level of specialized services to veterans. These services include the expected and important direct services from the DVS, such as coordination of U.S. Veterans Administration benefits, providing skilled nursing and home health care services, operating two (and planning a third) veteran cemeteries, and assisting administration of GI education benefits.

Beyond these traditional programs, however, the commonwealth offers a range of veterans' services. Most significant, these include proactive efforts by the state's human resource agency, the Department of Human Resource Management (DHRM), to match veterans with available state jobs and job training. The

DHRM also reaches out to other state agencies to ensure that veterans — disabled veterans in particular — are afforded preference in any hiring decisions.

## Some Employment Programs

The Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) provides innovative assistance for veterans through its Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) and Local Veterans Employment Representative (LVER) Program. There are 38 DVOP and more than 40 LVER specialists working at VEC offices statewide helping veterans find training and employment. The VEC also serves more than 15,000 servicemembers annually through its Transition Assistance Program, which helps military personnel stationed across Virginia transition from the military to the civilian workforce with a variety of services, including three-day job search skills workshops. Through its programs, the VEC helped almost 21,000 Virginia veterans secure employment in 2006.

The commonwealth helps to meet the special housing needs of disabled veterans through the Virginia Housing Development Authority's (VHDA) Granting Freedom Program, which provides grants for veterans to modify their homes to accommodate disabilities suffered in combat. The VHDA currently has more than \$1 million to provide ramps, widen doors, and install grab rails to improve veterans' home lives.

The second half of the DVS report identified opportunities for improving current services and expanding services through partnering among the DVS and other state agencies. As one might expect, the DVS found numerous opportunities for improvement. At the top of the list is the need to provide better coordination among state agencies. For example, the DVS and other veterans' organizations are very aware of the connection between exposure to Agent Orange and diabetes. When it is confirmed that Agent Orange exposure led to a veteran's diabetes, the veteran is entitled to disability pay. Yet, the DVS has discovered that rarely are newly diagnosed diabetic veterans screened to determine whether they were exposed to Agent Orange. The DVS will shortly launch an outreach program to all health care providers, veterans groups, or otherwise to help change this trend.

The DVS also plans to launch a robust Internet-based one-stop shop that will help veterans, their families, health care providers, and organizations that service the general population but have a significant number of veteran clients. This Web presence will be modeled somewhat after the SeniorNavigator program that has been so successful for senior citizens. This program's aim will be to identify proactively those benefits for which a veteran may be eligible and reduce the effort and delay of bringing those benefits to veterans.

## Assembly Aims to Help, Too

In addition to these initiatives put forward under EO 19, the current session of the General Assembly is awash with veteran-friendly proposals. Many of these bills are designed to recognize further veterans for their service to the country and to provide some tax relief to veterans and military personnel. Others provide direct financial assistance to veterans and their families for their sacrifice. In this group, one of the most significant is the effort by a number of legislators to expand the provision of in-state tuition rates for veterans and dependents. Additionally, some members of the General Assembly have introduced legislation to expand college benefits to include room and board for survivors of those killed in the line of duty. These legislative initiatives echo the governor's provision of funds in his administration's budget amendments for room-and-board waivers.

Virginia's veterans have always been well-served by the commonwealth's political leadership. You should expect Virginia's veterans to continue to receive top billing, because they have earned it. If you choose to contact legislators and the governor, your encouragement will be especially timely as the General Assembly looks for money to satisfy the commonwealth's transportation appetite.

■ *A graduate of West Point, John Montgomery retired from the Army after having served as an Airborne Ranger and inspector general of the Louisiana National Guard. A Sandston resident and lawyer, he advised former Gov. Mark Warner on military issues. His Commentary Columns regarding veterans appear regularly on the Back Fence.*

## WHAT CAN VIRGINIA DO?

# Assembly Appreciates What Military Has Done

VIRGINIA BEACH. My husband and I have a weekend ritual: We rise early and drive into town for coffee at a local Starbucks near the Navy base. We never fail to run into military friends we haven't seen in some time. We catch up on deployment cycles and exchange notes on our families. On a weekend not long ago we ran into one of my husband's buddies in line with his wife. His sunglasses were on and a bruise ran down the side of his swollen face.



TERRIE SUIT

"What'd you do to your face, dude?" my husband asked with the typical sensitivity of a military man. His friend grinned, pulled off his glasses (to reveal a rather gruesome site), and replied, "I got hit a week ago Friday." "In a car accident?" I asked, astonished. "No," he chuckled, then looked at my husband and casually stated, "I got fragg'd by a grenade, man." The guys peeled off to talk weapons and tactics while his wife and I chatted about the efficiency of the notification process, the surgery scheduled for the next week, and their kids. It was oddly routine, the way other wives might chat about school grades and last summer's vacation.

On another weekend we were at the local hardware store. We turned down an aisle, where a friend stood looking for a tool to complete a home-improvement project. We exchanged hugs and told him how proud we were that he had just been awarded the Navy Cross.

These are just two of the tens of thousands of men and women who make Virginia home while they serve this nation as members of our military. Every day we see our friends — at the grocery store, at the gasoline station, at the video rental shop. The faces are different but the stories similar. They are professionals — no drama, no self-promotion, no exploitation of their experiences for personal gain. They do their job and their families cope while they are in harm's way. To the average Virginia citizen who might see them out and about on a Saturday morning, they are just another guy and his wife getting coffee at Starbucks and another dad with a honey-do list to complete. They don't ask to be recognized; they don't ask for special treatment. And while they are here, making Virginia their home, a son or daughter of Virginia is stationed in another state inconspicuously doing the same.

## 'Heroes Walk Among Us'

The oft-used statement "heroes walk among us" is truer than people realize. These heroes are our neighbors, our workmates' spouses, and our child's classmate's parent. They are the man in the car next to us and the woman jogging through the park. You may not realize who they are, but they are here. They are a part of our community.

What can we do as a state to recognize the men and women who are willing to put themselves in harm's way in order to protect our freedom and our way of life? What can we do to thank their families who support

them with love and understanding during the missed holidays, birthdays, recitals, and ballgames?

## Legislation Can Lend a Hand

We can do for them what other states do for our Virginia servicemembers stationed within their borders. We can pass legislation that allows these servicemembers to pursue college courses at in-state tuition rates while they are stateside (HB 1822, which I sponsor); we can fully fund the cost of a college education for their widows and orphans (HB 2179, sponsored by Henrico's Bill Janis); we can provide a loan that would assist the Virginia War Memorial in building an educational wing so that future generations can have a better understanding of the sacrifices made for their freedom (HB 2240, sponsored by Colonial Heights' Kirk Cox).

These are just a few of the many bills introduced this legislative session. Some of the others are merely hassle-reducing measures to make life a little easier. None of these bills would purport to be the be-all, end-all offer of thanks. But together, they ease the burden of living far from the home these servicemembers know. They are a gesture of gratitude for the sacrifices these men and women make. And hopefully they convey the message: "We appreciate what you do for us."

■ *Terrie Suit is a Navy wife of 17 years who represents the 81st District (parts of Chesapeake and Virginia Beach) in the Virginia House of Delegates. Her husband will retire this year after 27 years of combined Navy and Marine Corps service.*